# AN AMP & DIGITAL DJ SYSTEM

By Mike Klasco, Tony Russell & Reed Dailey

**Vestax's VCI-300: Bundled with Serato ITCH, a complete system.**

**Crest's CC 5500: "A powerful, bad-ass amp."**

This month, we look at a power amplifier and a controller/software combo. The Bay Area's Mike Klasco and Tony Russell take on the Crest CC 5500 amp, while Atlanta's Reed Dailey does the Vestax VCI-300 with Serato ITCH software.

**Crest CC 5500**

Crest Audio has been a respected name in the pro amplifier world since the late 1970s. While not as strong a blip on the radar of younger mobile DJs, Crest still stands as a familiar name to DJ vets and concert-sound guys.

The CC 5500 is the high-power flagship of the four models in the CC Series. All feature efficient, low-hum, toroidal (donut shaped) transformers, tunnel-cooled heat sinks, variable-speed DC fans and extensive protection circuitry and stable operation into difficult loads and power conditions.

The Crest CC 5500 has taken the heavy-iron approach with a big power transformer, thick steel chassis and good heat sinks. While only two rack spaces high (3.5-inches high), the CC 5500 is deep and weighs almost 50 pounds. It provides 1,800 watts per channel at 4 ohms and 1,150 watts per channel at 8 ohms.

I will get to the technical aspects in a bit, but first for our field test, San Francisco DJ Tony Russell took the CC 5500 to a couple of jobs. Here's Tony…

"The CC5500 is so named due to the fact the amp is rated at 5,500 watts RMS in bridged mono mode. Regardless of how you run this good-sounding beast, it is still going to crush rocks—or really rock out the crowd!

"The set-up of the amp is simple and effective with the front panel offering the power switch, nice bright LEDs and 'A' and 'B' dial input adjusts. The rear panel offers a similar arrangement with your XLR or TRS input connectors, power supply cable (turn lock on the 5500), and both Speakon and banana outputs.

"As you can probably assume by my comments above, this amp works great. The clarity is superb and the response is excellent as well. We used the Community Sonus subwoofers, which could really handle all the power, and later the Community Sonus 15-inch, 2-way boxes. I'd say this amp would excel in almost any situation, whether we are talking about a mobile gig, live band, nightclub or whatever use you need an amp that puts out 5,500 watts for. In summary, the CC 5500 is bad-ass amp."

OK, so a thumbs-up from Tony! Let's move back to the test bench.

A Look Inside: Access is easy and from the bottom of the chassis with only a few screws needed to be removed to get inside. The CC 5500 boasts superior construction and first-class materials, with clean layout and a single-wire harness. It has one main circuit board—it's double sided of high-grade glass epoxy. This circuitboard construction withstands tough use. The heat sinks have a large array of 16 output transistors to share the load and this reduces stress when driving the amp hard, such as when you are driving a couple of speaker boxes in parallel. The CC 5500 uses a Class H design for higher efficiency, which translates to less heat.

I should mention that the power cord is a high-current, 120-volt, three-twist-lock prong plug. The CC5500 draws a lot of current and the typical power cord is not rated for much more than 20 amps. (Note that 30-amp power outlets that accommodate this plug are not so common in clubs.) I would also caution that the power line cord is not removable and adaptors to connect from the CC 5500 power plug to the typical wall plug are hard to find. If your work takes you to many clubs and you want to avoid power-plug incompatibility surprises, the rest of the CC Series has removable power cords that can accommodate the standard 3-wire power cords.

Power ratings for the CC Series are as follows: The CC 1800 is 450 watts x 2 into 8 ohms; the CC 2800 is 595 watts x 2 into 8 ohms; and the CC 4000 is 800 x 2 into 8 ohms. All can put out much more, down to 2 ohms.

Front and Rear Panel: When installed in a rack, what you see are the two level controls, the power switch, and the "idiot lights" for limiter, high-temp conditions, etc. Also much of the front panel space is for the air cooling grille. Overall, very pleasant and purposeful. On the back side, the balanced Input connectors are combo (XLR/phone plugs). For the outputs, there are binding posts and Speakon outputs.

As they say on the movie review shows, thumbs up for the CC 5500 ($1,549 list).

**Vestax VCI-300**

Vestax, distributed Stateside by American Music & Sound, has added the all-new VCI-300 to its popular VCI controller line. This dedicated USB/MIDI/Audio unit comes bundled with Serato's ITCH software. The addition of a built-in an audio interface with headphone and mic jacks means all one needs is a VCI-300 ($899 MAP) and a laptop to be ready to DJ.

Vestax has moved from an all-stainless-steel finish in their previous VCI model to a sleek, all-black, high-gloss finish. It's best appreciated when the lights are off and the controller is illuminated by blue, green and red lights. Control itself is divided into two main sections. The top part houses the majority of hot-cue buttons, software navigation controls, customary mixer control knobs (High, Mid, and Low), pitch controls, and loop buttons. The bottom portion has a curved crossfader, volume controls, and jogs wheel for each of the two channels. Master cue and play/pause buttons are located below the jog wheel.

Vestax has definitely made a few subtle changes and modifications

from previous VCI versions, which have really taken the 300 to both a more professional and creative level. Some of the more noticeable differences include: coated knobs in a rubber casing, making tweaking and twisting a whole lot easier; adjustable torque; and added texture lines on the jog wheels, which mimic a record and provides a truer feel when scratching. Also, three new cue buttons, located in the top portion of the VCI-300 unit, allow for faster cue-point control that maps back to the Serato Itch software. One-push auto loop control coupled with a half and double button is by far my favorite feature with the VCI-300. This feature let me chop loops on the fly, bring in tension, and really make each track my own.

Often when using a controller, it's difficult to navigate through one's digital library—you're forced to go back and forth from controller to the laptop. But Vestax has done a fantastic job of fully integrating its hardware to ITCH software, allowing for a much more intuitive library search system. Included is a search wheel with a push button in the middle of the search wheel, allowing users the ability to look through their entire library and jump back and forth from crates and files. Quick "crate," "files," and "browse" hot buttons are included in the setup, which helps decrease search time.

Located directly below the navigation wheel are three loading buttons. By selecting the middle "scroll" button with an accompanying right or left button, a selected song will be loaded into the corresponding Serato Itch right or left channel. The whole searching process is extremely easy and quick. Having the navigation controls in the middle of the VCI-300 makes maneuvering extremely easy. The fact that the hardware maps seamlessly to Serato Itch software allows the user to never again have to touch their laptop during a performance.

With all these amazing new updates, the VCI-300 can control Serato Itch and MIDI. Vestax also has included a built-in audio interface, which carries an Audio Codec IC with outstanding audio characteristics, generated by a delta-sigma modulation 24 bit stereo D/A-A/D converter. Audio connection includes one stereo input, one MIC input and two stereo outputs (Master L/R, Monitor L/R).

Both your Master Volume and Cue Monitor are controlled by knobs. But where the VCI-300 really impresses is the panning knob for the cue monitors, allowing users to hear what is currently playing in their cue, or in the audience—or combination of both. I think this is a really nice feature, considering some of the questionable sound systems you find in clubs. It is just one more thing that helps give users more control over the entire experience.

Furthermore, with the addition of the internal sound card, purchasing and carrying additional external sound cards is not necessary. If users do have an additional MP3 or external CD player, there is the capability to connect to the VCI-300 via RCA inputs. This can work as a backup and provide added flexibility in case someone brings you a must-have tune that you haven't pre-loaded on your computer.

Scratching has always been synonymous with Vestax, and the VCI-300 doesn't disappoint. The crossfader has adjustable curve, allowing for quick cuts or long fades. The pulse resolution of the jog wheel platter and pitch control fader is four times higher than the VCI-100. The pitch control faders are extremely responsive. Unlike traditional turntables, there's a jog wheel torque adjustment control, allowing users to dictate the responsiveness of platter. Furthermore, by turning off the scratch button, the jog wheel acts as a nudge function, minimally moving the song forwards or backwards based on how hard one pushes the wheel. The only concern with scratching: Due to the compact nature of the control, sometimes it felt a little squeezed together, so scratching and working the crossfader felt a bit uncomfortable.

Vestax has created an amazingly compact and durable product with the VCI-300. The re-engineered controls make navigating Serato Itch software a breeze. The addition of a sound card to the controller allows users to carry less and give additional control. I really recommend this product.